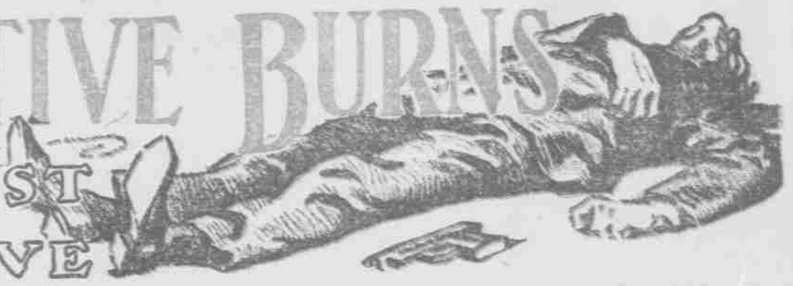
GREAT CASES OF DETECTIVE BURNS

TOLD BY THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS LIVING DETECTIVE



II--A Promoter Of Counterfeits

By William J. Burns

Dear Sir:

If you will cautiously and quietly approach James R. Worthington of 126 ——— Street, B———, he will be able to furnish you with a clue that may lead to the apprehension of a man who is engaged in the circulation of counterfeit ten-dollar notes. Although I do not sign this letter, I would ask you kindly to treat the fact that you have received it in confidence, as he might suspect the identity of the person suggesting his name.

IT was in the spring of the year 1894, when I was stationed in St Louis, and when there was in circulation in the western states a counterfeit ten-dollar note of which the government agents had been unable to find the maker, that I received the above anonymous letter.

I studied the letter. It had been written on a standard typewriter, and rather crudely so. The paper used was of good quality and of regulation letter head size. The postmark on the envelope showed that it had been mailed on a railroad train. The language indicated that the writer was a business man of education. It also told me that the writer of the letter was probably none other than James R. Worthington himself.

Letter That Was "off Normal."

It is a curious thing, but human nature acts invariably in the same way under similar impulses. When a man is lying, he uses the gestures of a lie.

Now, James R. Worthington had betrayed himself to me by his glib plausibility. In the words of my profession, he had "overtrained." In every way, his letter was "off normal."

An ordinary anonymous "tip" of the sort would have read after this fashion: "James R. Worthington of 126 ——— street, B———, has information that may lead to the arrest of counterfeiters."

Who, better than Worthington, would know that he had this information? And if James R. Worthington were a business man, employing a stenographer, would he not type the letter himself, clumsily, but on good paper? And would he not post it at a railroad station to prevent the postmark showing that it came from the town where he lived? And, with the too plausible air of a studied falsehood, would not Worthington ask me to treat the communication "in confidence, as he (the counterfeiter) might suspect the identity of the person suggesting his name?"

Burns Decides on a Visit.

Some years before I had conducted a government investigation in B——— and so knew that the house of Worthington's address was in a well-to-do residential section. It seemed hardly possible that he could be mixed up with the counterfeiters. But why had he made so guilty an approach?

That night I spent at a hotel in B——— and early the next morning started up the street toward the residential district in which Worthington had his home. A middle-aged servant opened the door as if he suspected me of being a book agent.

"Mr. Worthington," I said, authoritatively, and stepped in.

I followed her into an old-fashioned oblong hall that opened at one end upon the green shade of the veranda. During the minute that I stood alone in the hall, I heard voices, presumably at the breakfast table. Then Worthington came out into the hall. He looked out under his eyebrows sharply when he beheld me. He was a large, heavy-boned man in a black frock coat with a strong, smooth-shaven face, and an imposing dome of bald skull. More than ever at sight of him, it seemed impossible to me that he could have any guilty knowledge of counterfeiting.

"May I speak to you privately for a moment?" I asked abruptly, before Worthington had time to greet me.

Worthington Betrays Secret.

Worthington's face instantly told me that he understood, for over it there flashed a quick scrutiny, followed by an attempt to appear unconscious and matter-of-fact.

"Come in," he said, as he led the way to the library-sitting room. "What is it? Sit down."

He shut the door, which, apparently, was not often closed, for he had to push back a divan to clear its swing. It was clearly up to me to begin.

"Mr. Worthington," I said, "I'm an agent of the United States secret service, and I have a matter here in which I think you can be of material aid—if you will. I take it that, being a good citizen, you will be willing to aid the government in any way you can. That is why I have had no hesitation in coming to you."

Once again, Worthington "overtrained." He had been listening with the watchful eye of a man who is confronted. But now he said, nervously: "I can't imagine how I can be of any service to you."

I apparently ignored his remark. "I am satisfied," I went on, "from certain investigations we have made, that you are in a position, at this time, to disclose the identity of a man who is mixed up in the counterfeiting of a ten-dollar note."

"What is His Name?"

For a time, Worthington remained silent. Apparently, he was studying the situation; in reality, he was endeavoring to make me think that he was debating in his mind whether or not he should admit that he had anything to tell.

"Well," he said, at last, "you are right, I do know something—something that may be of assistance to you. But first I want to know whether I shall be drawn into the matter, or whether the government will undertake not to disclose the source of its information. If I am promised absolute secrecy concerning my part in the affair, I will gladly give you what help I can. And you must promise not to ask me how I learned what I shall tell you."

I assured him that this confidence would be respected, that he would not be involved in any way, that no questions would be asked of him.

He passed his hand over his forehead and looked worriedly at me. And this time it was with honest reluctance that he spoke.

"Well, then, I have reason to believe that one of our business men is implicated."

This was, of course, the explanation of his guilty approach. He was ashamed of informing on a business acquaintance.

"What business is he in?" I asked.

"He is a promoter. He has made a great deal of money in real estate here, and in other ways. He now finances undertakings of various sorts."

"He is wealthy?"

"I understand that he is. Yes—very wealthy."

"What is his name?"

"George G. Wain."

"Can you give me his address?"

"His home is several blocks east of here—number 812."

"Thank you. I shall look the matter up."

As I arose to take my leave, I could see, from Worthington's serious air of concern, that he believed his information to be correct. I was equally convinced that if Worthington were right, the case was so unusual as to be practically unique.

How Wain Gained His Riches.

During my previous work in B——— I had learned enough of the town to know that George G. Wain was one of the prominent rich men of the community. He had made a fortune in the land boom that had struck B——— years before. He had bought the street railway, converted it into an electric system, and as common gossip had it, had bribed the city authorities to allow him to extend the system where it would make him the most profit, and nowhere else—that is, to his "residential" suburbs. He had made another fortune, according to common report, by watering the stock of his railway company and selling out his holdings.

Burns Asks a Question.

Wain's house was one of the aristocracy of the town. Reaching it, I climbed a flight of cement steps imposing enough for an entrance to a public museum, and pressed the electric bell.

"Mr. Wain," I said briefly, to the maid that opened the door, and at once she ushered me into a large reception hall resplendent with Persian rugs, marble statuary, French clocks, and all the other decorative evidences of luxury.

Almost immediately there stood before me a withered-looking, middle-aged man, whose general appearance was that of well-groomed ill health. He had been a small man at his best; he was now evidently shrunken from indigestion. He was very thin in the wrists; the skin was loose about his eyes; his eyelids were wrinkled like a fowl's, his cheeks sunken under rusty side-whiskers, his reddish hair combed across the baldness of a head that looked as white and soft as a bladder of lard.

"Mr. Wain," I said, with an official air, "I should like to speak to you privately for a moment."

He gave me a rather blank, indifferent look, and then led me to an inner room which proved to be a library.

I told him my name and occupation. Then, "I am seeking information," I said, "concerning the counterfeiting of a certain ten-dollar note. I have reason to believe that you are in a position to tell me something of the makers of it."

Out of staring eyes Wain looked at me.

"Mr. Burns," he asked, at last, "would you mind telling me how you learned that I knew of this?"

I sat down. "That, of course," I answered, "is a confidential matter with the government. I am not permitted to tell you."

A Watchful Young Woman.

All the time I was aware that a young woman—whom I tok to be the daughter of the house—was watching us through the hangings of a doorway at the farther end of the room. As I looked aside at her, she withdrew, but not before I saw the anxiety and apprehension written upon her face. She was, of course, unable to hear what was being said. What, then, was it that she suspected?

I studied the man before me. Wain was regarding me sharply.

"It is true," he said, at last, "as I suppose you know, that I have been interested in the making of that note. That is to say, the proposition was put up to me by the engraver of it, who wished me to finance the undertaking because my business is that of a promoter."

I listeneded with as little show of interest as possible in order to pretend that what was being said was not worth being greatly interested in, and thus draw out Wain's story to the smallest detail. As a matter of fact, I was thinking that the girl must have known—that she must have supposed me to be another of the counterfeiters. That would explain her alarm.

But what of the easy nonchalance of Wain's admission? He was talking of a "proposition" to finance counterfeiting as if it were the most ordinary of business undertakings.

"Why," I asked, disinterestedly, "do you suppose these men came to you with such a scheme?"

"That is simple enough," and Wain spread his hands. "It was in line with what men in our business have been doing all over this country for years past. Take my own case, for example. Consider it in the aspects in which this counterfeit presented it to me.

"I began here as a speculator in real estate boom times. In my land deals I capitalized the future earnings of this town, as you might say. You understand, of course, a town lot has no value except what comes to it from the industry and success of the citizens of the town. I capitalized the future earning power and production of those citizens—overcapitalized it—and they are still working to pay interest on that capital, if you understand what I mean."

Burns Arrives at a "Theory."

Suddenly, I arrived at a "theory" that explained the daughter's anxiety as well as her father's truly astonishing confession.

"I put into my pocket," continued Wain, encouraged by my nod, "the public increment on huge blocks of land here—money that, in the final aspect, belonged to the city itself. But in doing so I was only doing what 'promoters' make a business of doing generally in this country, you understand," he added, half apologetically.

I listened without a word. The girl still lingered about, behind the curtains.

"Then I went into loans, collecting upon the commercial distress which my previous operations had helped to create. I bought a controling interest in several industrial companies and reorganized them in such a way that all the profits of the industries came to us and the original stockholders received only a small income on their investments. These operations are quite common, Mr. Burns. Men are performing them today in every city, probably, in the country. Why should we draw the line in promoting counterfeiting?"

A Strange Dream.

"Just a moment, Mr. Wain," I interrupted. "Would you mind telling me how a man in your position and of your standing, came to meet the engraver of this note?"

"That was curious," he said. "Some months ago I began to dream continually of being in a locality that was quite unfamiliar to me. In my waking moments I could not remember ever having seen it, yet it became extraordinarily vivid in my mind from these dreams.

"Last month I had occasion to go to S———, where we were reorganizing a gas and electric company that wanted a new franchise to supply the town with light and power. One day, as I walked away from my hotel, I recognized the street. I could have told you the names on the shop signs before I came to them. I remembered particularly the gilt lettering on the plateglass windows of a bank. And when I came to a hitching post in front of a hardware store—it was a metal figure of a negro boy holding up a tie-ring—I recollected that there should have been a man waiting for me, with his hand on that post. That was the way we had met in my dream.

"He was not there. I went back again in the evening, but he was not there. On the following morning, as I approached, I saw him. I went up to him and said: 'You are looking for me?'

"He replied that he was looking for some one with money who would be willing to back him in an enterprise in which there would be large returns.

"I explained that I was evidently the man he wanted, since I was a promoter by profession. He made an appointment to call on me at my hotel. And he came.

"He told me then that he was an engraver; that he had worked hard all his life, honestly, and had remained poor; that he had been reading much about modern business methods, and had a right to use his ability to make money regardless of the honesty of the means.

"He pointed out to me that in selling watered stock I had really been selling a sort of counterfeit stock certificate. He argued, too, that we would do no one an injustice by issuing counterfeit money, since, as long as it was kept in circulation, it would be worth its face value. If a man suspected it, he could pass it on to some one else, just as he would with stocks.

"He was very convincing. He went over my whole career with me, very much as I have related it to you. I finally agreed to finance his scheme, and he got out his ten-dollar note. We are now arranging to distribute them in large quantities throughout the country."

A Call Upon Wain's Lawyer.

"I suppose," I said, "you have an attorney who attends to your legal business?"

"I have," he replied. "Mr. Rudolph Schmidt, in the Burlington building. But I have not consulted him in this matter."

"Have you taken any one into your confidence?"

"One man only. I have spoken guardedly to him. He is in a position to help us put the notes into circulation, because he is manager of a local bank. This seemed an opportunity to help him make a large profit."

"You have said nothing to your daughter?"

"Nothing explicit."

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"No. I was just about to start when you came in."

"I will not keep you from it any longer," I said, rising. "I shall come back later."

I found Mr. Rudolph Schmidt in his office.

"I have heard of you," he said briefly, when I had introduced myself.

"And you," I said, "are attorney for Mr. George G. Wain, are you not?"

"In some of his private affairs."

"And what would you say if I told you that Mr. Wain had been financing the counterfeiting of a ten-dollar note?" I asked, accepting his curt emphasis upon the "private."

"I would say that you were crazy," Schmidt replied grimly.

"And if he confessed the fact to you himself?"

Schmidt stared at me.

"If you will make an appointment to be at Mr. Wain's house at 3 o'clock this afternoon, I shall be glad to take the matter up with you and your client on behalf of the government," I said, putting on my hat. "I do not presume to advise you, but I think it would be well to have his daughter present, since she will have to be consulted in the end."

I had reached the door before Schmidt found voice to call: "Just a moment. Do you mean to tell me——"

"Mr. Wain will tell you," I called back. "I prefer—in a 'private' matter of this sort—that it should come from him. I shall see you, then, at three o'clock."

Denouement.

I went back to my hotel, where I telephoned to Worthington, who agreed to see me at one o'clock at luncheon, which he ate at home. Then I had my own lunch at the hotel, bought a ticket back to St. Louis on the evening train, and strolled out to call on Worthington.

I found him reading a newspaper in his library, looking very worried and uneasy.

"Mr. Wain," I said, "has admitted to me his connection with the counterfeiters. And he tells me that you were the only person asked to join him in the scheme."

Worthington dropped his paper on the floor and turned gray in the face.

"Mr. Burns," he stammered, "you said—you promised me that I shouldn't be drawn into this—that you'd respect my confidence. I refuse——"

"The case will not be prosecuted, Mr. Worthington. You will not be in any way involved. Perhaps it would interest you to know—since we are exchanging confidences—that your method of informing me, through an anonymous letter, that you could give me a clue to the counterfeiters, is not uncommon among good citizens who wish to warn the government in such circumstances."

"Through an anonymous— Do you mean to intimate that I—?"

"Wain approached you, as I have said, and you wrote me anonymously, asking me to call on you."

"Well," Worthington admitted shamefacedly, "I thought you might reach him before he became so deeply involved that it would be too late to save him."

"And it never occurred to you, then, that he was not in his right mind?"

"Wain?"

"That you were being imposed upon by a man with a delusion?"

Worthington rose to his feet. "George Wain! Good heavens!"

"His mind has become affected. His daughter has suspected it for some time. As a matter of fact, Wain has had no more to do with counterfeiting that ten-dollar note than you have."

* * *

We had our consultation that afternoon, and Wain was taken to Europe by his daughter for his health. I saw in the papers some time later that he died there. She was a fine girl. She kept the whole thing quiet—bore it alone. Not a word of it ever got out.

Next week Detective Burns will tell of his first great case—how he solved the arson mysteries that had baffled the police force of a large city.

Frederic J. Haskin's "American Government."

As long as they last, copies of Frederic J. Haskin's great book, "The American Government," may be had at The Herald office. Present clipping of this paragraph and 60 cents. By mail, 15 cents additional.

Bill Gallagher, brakeman on the Santa Fe at San Marcial, is laying off and Carl Cambell is filling the vacancy.